

Back Cast

By Ron Wilson

Calling squirrels – with apologies to the bugling, cow-talking, elk hunting fraternity I was once a member of – reminds me of trying to tempt a bull within bow and arrow range.

Yeah, I understand the giant differences, the sizes of the animals, for one. But there are parallels when it's a wide-eyed 10-year-old operating the call the bushytails surrender to.

It's the 2004 squirrel opener – a celebrated happening in some states, but just another mark on the calendar to most in North Dakota – and my son and I are tiptoeing through a multirow tree belt in Wells County. As if to congratulate ourselves for being in the right place, we nod and quietly kick the occasional corn cob carried here, picked clean and abandoned by squirrels.

We're not 50 yards into our hunt when, because of repeated pleas by my son and simple curiosity, we lean against a tree and bring out the squirrel call. It's a simple device that's even easier to use by tapping the rubber bellows against your leg "to achieve realistic squirrel chatter," or so the directions say.

Days before entering the woods, my hunting partner practiced in the back yard with his call, "barking" back and forth to the city slicker squirrels that raid our bird feeders. Response from these freeloaders was good, but nothing compared to the raucous reaction our dog gets for simply wandering too close.

In the woods, he taps the call lightly three times, before hitting it harder several more times in a row and ... nothing. He repeats the sequence again and ... nothing. "Should have brought the dog," I whisper.

I know more about hunting elk than squirrels, so there is little I can offer other than humor and encouragement to try again. Young hunters just starting out look to their parents or mentors for all the answers, which makes sense, considering we act as if we know it all at home. Truth is, be it in the field or city limits, we're sometimes winging it and hoping for the best.

I shrug my shoulders and whisper, "Try it again ... harder this time."

After a spell, and itching to explore more country, we finally get a response deep into the tree belt. The chatter gets closer and closer the longer we sit and the more often my sidekick strikes the bellows against his thigh. Soon, the squirrel's acrobatic path is unmistakable, highlighted by tree branches swaying with its weight.

Like a bull elk, the squirrel hangs up short, refusing to come any closer, hidden by leaves that won't drop for a couple weeks. We don't dare move, not even to tap the call. Like my camouflaged hunting partner, limbs and leaves not 10 yards away shake with every volley of chatter.

"If he moves, take only good shots," I whisper.

He never gets the chance. Seeing or sensing something that's not right, the squirrel turns tail, bouncing limbs back the way he came.

Instead of discontent, there's elation. Instead of to heck with this, there's give me more. "That was so cool ... let's do it again," I hear.



And we do. We call squirrels throughout the day, even during the downtimes when animals are supposed to be hunkered, waiting for that magic time when afternoon turns to evening. We can't pull ourselves from the woods, fascinated by what we see – a white-tailed doe that blows and stomps her front leg menacingly almost in our camouflaged laps – and what we don't see – other hunters.

With nothing to kill but time, and hopefully a squirrel or two for camp, we wander unhurriedly through the trees, sidestepping downfalls and anything else that might give us up. To someone watching, we could easily be mistaken for just a couple of guys – not hunters – searching diligently, ever so slowly, for something valuable we dropped.

The amount of tiptoeing is surpassed only by the time we spend sitting back to back, if you don't count the tree trunk between us, looking for movement and things out of place. It's surprising how many squirrels we spot – the flicking of a tail, a head that could pass for any other bump on a tree, but somehow is different.

We move again, and then find another tree to lean against. Our view changes dramatically, even though the steps we take to get here could be counted on two hands with digits to spare. Looking back over a shoulder, we've traveled maybe 100 yards, but it's taken almost two hours to do it. Count the number of squirrels spotted in that distance and we agree the tactic is working. Now if we could just improve our shooting ...

Back in camp, we clean the day's bag – our first squirrels as hunting partners – pulling the hide away from meat like you'd peel a wet sock from your foot. For the first time since daylight, we sit in chairs with armrests and cup holders, and it sort of feels odd not to be leaning against a tree.